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Chatting around the campfire at Normandy Farms in Foxboro are winter campers, from left: Bill Struck, Gina Struck and Alexandria Struck of Brockton; Carol Briggs of Avon; Angle Sundling of Holbrook; Haley Starr, 6, of Brockton; Al Sundling of Holbrook and Ralph Cochran of Avon.

Forest frolic

Friendship thaws the chilliest days at Foxboro's Normandy Farms community

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FOXBORO

Neither rain nor snow nor winter's cold can deter these friends from their outdoor gatherings. They meet year-

round at Normandy Farms, a campground that lured them first as a vacation spot, and has now become their destination for all seasons.

Families that have been camping at Normandy for years have become forever friends, getting together there and elsewhere all year long.

"It's like having a cottage at the Cape," said Angle Sundling of Holbrook, who has been going there with her family for years, and who spends many winter weekends there.

"It's a home away from home."

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Angle Sundling of Holbrook

Its inhabitants have become as close as kin.

"It's like an extended family," said Jack O'Connor of Cambridge, who has been camping there since 1979, and living there full time with his wife for the past eight years. They gave up their apartment overlooking the Charles River, and now O'Connor commutes daily from Foxboro to his job in Cambridge. While the drive is tough at times, he knows it's well worth it every time he comes back home.

"When I pass through the



Haley Starr, 6, of Brockton, lights homework with sun.

gates (of the campground), it's like being in Vermont or Maine, like being in the wilderness," he said. "Out in the trees, in the woods, you can dream you are anywhere. It's a good life."

"It's a summer community that goes into all seasons," said Jane Bernier of Warwick, R.I., who has been camping there with her family for years. She totes her trailer back and forth,

and has camped at times in other locations, but no other place is quite the same.

"No matter where we went, the kids couldn't wait to get back and go to the campground," she said.

A number of families like the Sundlings leave their trailers there through the winter, and spend weekends, especially the holiday ones.

Many of them were there last weekend for St. Patrick's Day celebrations.

But don't think these winter-time campers are necessarily roughing it. People have that image, Bernier said, but "we are not hardy souls that go into the woods."

Not a tent-on-the-ground kind of camper, Bernier said she likes having heat and running water, and accommodations that she calls "comfy."



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Camper cribbage

Angie Sundling of Holbrook, left, gets a kick out of a card game with a friend, Gina Struck of Brockton, in a camper at Normandy Farms in Foxboro. Sundling and

her family have been coming to the site for years. They spend many winter weekends there. The Strucks are among several families with whom they socialize.

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"We are not uncomfortable," she said. "We are not roughing it whatsoever."

Over the years, a group of about 60 people have become regulars, and have extended their campground friendships well beyond the summer season. They also get together throughout the year for family celebrations, Christmas parties at each other's homes, cruises to places like Alaska and Bermuda, and trips like an upcoming one to Las Vegas.

Many of the families initially turned to camping as a way of taking inexpensive vacations with their children, and a way of taking many more vacations than they could otherwise afford.

At the campground's pools and the playgrounds, their children played together, then the parents started socializing, and making more and more plans together.

O'Connor said a camaraderie formed among the regulars, and now the children who grew up together are bringing their own children to the campground.

They also grew up with the Daniels family, which owns and operates the site.

"People form friendships that last forever," said Doris Daniels, who is in charge of activities. "It's one generation after another."

At the campground, the regulars are known as the "fun group," O'Connor said, because they are always up to something. The planned activities become so much more through their contests and competitions, songs and skits.

"A couple of times we embarrassed the kids. Now the kids are carrying on the tradition," O'Connor said.

Grabbed his sled

He happened to hear of Normandy Farms more than 20 years ago, and took a ride there with his son one winter day. After his son saw a bunch of kids sliding on the campground's hillside, he grabbed his sled and joined them, while his father looked around, and liked what he saw.

The family camped there that spring, and has been going ever since, moving from a pop-up trailer to a 26-foot camper, to today's 40-footer.

Even that size gets a bit cramped in winter when the living is mostly indoors, but O'Connor said he takes walks when he feels hemmed in. Then in the spring, he puts up a 20-foot screen room for reading and relaxing, which greatly expands



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Bill Struck of Brockton, left, and Al Sundling, collaborate on starting a fire at Normandy Farms.

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'At home, you may not walk in the newly-fallen snow, and may look at it from the window instead. There, you throw on a coat and boots, and enjoy it.'

Jane Bernier of Warwick, R.I.

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the living space. Bernier says the tight confines just make the outdoors more welcoming.

"At home, you may not walk in the newly-fallen snow, and may look at it from the window instead," she said. "There, you throw on a coat and boots, and enjoy it." Cooking also takes place outdoors all year long, regardless of the temperature.

"We bundle up, and fire up the grill," O'Connor said.

If the outdoor air gets just a bit too wintry, they use one of the buildings and cook indoors.

"Cold weather does not stop us," Sundling said.

They also light up the crisp nights with campfires, and gather around.

"It can be freezing cold in winter. We sit outside, roll up in blankets, and have a great time," Sundling said.

Even storms don't seem to get in the way. A blizzard hit the area on St. Patrick's Day weekend a few years ago, yet 150 to 200 people showed up for the corned beef and cabbage dinner, O'Connor said. One reason for the attraction, Sundling said, is that the campground is so well run. Rules are in place, and problems dealt with quickly. The families themselves keep an eye on their surroundings, she said, because after all, "it's our campground."

She likens the pine-forested site to a resort, with its swimming pools, fields and playgrounds, its recreation lodge and schedule of activities throughout the year.

In family since 1759

The property off West Street has been in the Daniels family since 1759, and was a working farm until it was converted into a campground in 1976 with 65 sites. Now it has about 300 sites, with overflow areas that can boost the population to 450 in the busy summer season.

Rates range from \$28 to \$48 a night on weekends and holidays, depending on the season and the site. Weekly rates are \$168-\$312.

Doris Daniels said most people are seasonal summertime campers, and many do not live that far away. They have had campers who live right in town, and even right down the street.

"It's a getaway even though it's not far away," Daniels said.

Those who stay longer, she said, are usually trying to save up to buy a house or to retire, or stay there in between selling one house and buying another.

Surprisingly, the campground gets very few football fans traveling through town for Sunday games at nearby Foxboro Stadium. But it does get a number of people who are going to Boston hospitals for treatment, and want an inexpensive place to stay.

The campground has long been a supporter of the Jimmy Fund, Daniels said, and proceeds from events like ice cream socials, strawberry festivals, haunted houses and hay rides benefit its programs.

Oftentimes, the activity is held simply for the fun of it, and the "fun group" add to the festive mood. O'Connor is the annual leprechaun for St. Patrick's Day, and has at times been the Easter bunny, and Santa Claus.

Their celebrations have spanned just about every holiday, including New Year's Eve where no one has to drive home.

On Columbus Day, they buy apples at the Big Apple in Wrentham, then bake them into pies. On Halloween, they don costumes, and encourage their kids to go trick-or-treating around the campground.

Their camping lives are not entirely spent at Normandy Farms. These families move around, and have camped all over the East Coast, and even at Disney World.

But they always come back. "We like it here," Sundling said. "It's our place to go. It's where we are happiest."